



## “SPACE VS PLACE”\_ FOCUSING ON THE PLAZA IN FRONT OF BUILDING NO 9 IN PETERBOS SOCIAL HOUSING, BRUSSELS, BELGIUM

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### **ABSTRACT**

*According to Architect Lyndon (1997) —"Places are spaces that you can remember, that you can care about and make part of your life, the world should be filled with places so vivid and distinct that they can carry significance. Places could bring emotions, recollections, people and even ideas to mind". Donlyn Lyndon (1997, exhibition catalogue)*

*Space refers to a physical location and its substances, and a space becomes a place when it gets assigned with a meaning and social significance by individual. This is how a space receives meaning through different kind of interactions by specific and communal purposes.*

*Peterbos is one of the largest neighborhood of social housing In Brussels region under the municipality of Anderlecht. Approximately 3112 inhabitants are currently occupying the housing where a high percentage of people are immigrants. It has been found from a statistical data that 30 nationalities lives in Peterbos where 98% people are French speaking and 2% Dutch (Source: monitoring des quartiers, ibsa. Brussels, 2012). The master plan of Peterbos shows that it also has a high % of open and public spaces in comparison with its surrounding. Spaces are always formed by social behavior. This research will examine how the Plaza is appropriated by the user and whether and how this space has been transformed in to a place by social behavior or how social behavior transforms a space in to a place.*

**KEYWORDS:** Space, Place, Place Attachment

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The way a city or an area is perceived by human is multi-dimensional and it has multiple layers. Space is a vital issue here. Space has much definition and it's a complex matter. Space can be understood as a concept where we feel our existence. If we put an object on the ground, it occupies a space. Space varies with the dimensions how we look at it or think of it. Space is understood against time in quantum science. From Relativity we came to know that time and space is seemingly independent of human experience. In architecture, space is an interpretation of idea or imagination, which can be prevailing or imaginary. Architectural Spaces are of two types. Interior and Exterior space. Interior and exterior spaces both are self-explanatory by its name. Architecture has its own language. As we use alphabets to make words and arrange the words to form a meaningful sentence, like that architecture has its elements by which it

produces spaces. Any space can be understood from the relationship of its existing and non-existing element. Our perception of a composition of any space depends on how we interpret the visual interaction between these two (existing and non-existing) elements on the field. If we put a letter on a paper that letter act as a figure and the paper becomes ground. Likewise when a building or a space is created it acts as a figure on that ground and it has some elements.

Space in other field has some definitions. Social science says that space does not exists rather it is produced. According to Lefebvre space is perceived, conceived and lived. (Lefebvre, 2008). Here what he meant is space produced by social activity and interaction in everyday life which is perceived, a space can be rootless which is conceived and space is something symbolic through which one can connect and this is how it is lived.

Place is said to be a space with meaning. It does not have any boundary. Place is said to be that space which is not exchangeable to other space. This research would be to explore the plaza of Peterbos through combining framework from Architecture, Geography and Social Science, to understand whether and how this plaza is meaningful to the people and how it has become a place from a space.

### **Central Research Question**

How it becomes a place from a space?

Is there a Sense of place?

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The research framework is a qualitative study which have a Field investigation. The field investigation has been conducted to find out what people think about the space. This research followed four steps to field survey and these are:

A photographic, video graphy survey has been done in weekdays and weekends in the study area to investigate the context.

Interviewing on randomly selected respondents has been done to find out the use of spaces within neighborhood.

### **Possible Outcome**

How an architectural space transformed in to a place by social behavior.

### **Plaza of Peterbos\_Space Vs Place**



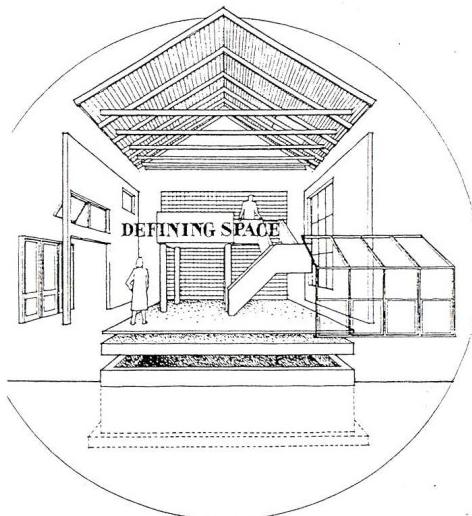
**Figure 1: Plan of Peterbos Showing the Location of Plaza and how it is connecting the Site with the Surroundings**



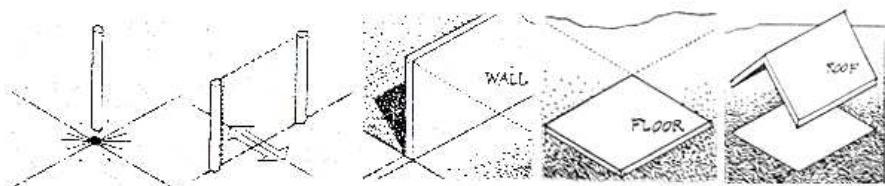
**Figure 2: View of the Plaza Showing its Physical Character with Light and Shadow**

On a sunny winter day, people socialize, kid's play, young boys hang around on the plaza in front of building number 9 in Peterbos. A plaza is said to be an open area which is situated near a building containing trees, walkways, sitting areas and sometimes with some shops. Peterbos is a social housing with diverse ethnic family from different parts of the world. This social housing has a central spine with a plaza approximately in the middle of the site. It acts as a connection to the north and south part of the site. It connects the whole site to the Rue Adolphe Willemyns on its south and Rue de la Proze on its north. The physical location of the plaza is on the west part of building number 9. The area is a rectilinear shape (*figure 1*) which has three different sections where the materials of ground cover are also different. Most of the part is built with pavement, some of the portion is lawn with shrubs and some has mud with some sitting areas overlooking the parking. On its east it has building number 09, on its west it has a parking area, on its north it is surrounded by building number 8 and on its south it has connecting walkways which also passes through a shop in building number 17. This plaza is also surrounded by large canopy trees on its south. It is also connected to the existing park on its south which is mostly used by the kids and females. The plaza also serves as a connection for the shop, pharmacy and social housing office in the ground floor of building number 9. It is also accessible from the Agronoomstraat Street from the west part of the site and from the parking area located on the west side. It also has connection to the boulevard on its east by a vehicular road. The plaza is properly lighted with sun throughout the day and also one can feel natural breeze here. The physical setting of the plaza having building no 9 in one side with its front surface and trees on the other side creates a sense of enclosure. The surface of the building (*figure 5*) acts like a plane which adds a three dimensional volumetric experience to the area. The ground where people move around defines its territorial boundaries. These physical characters can be termed as an element of that area.

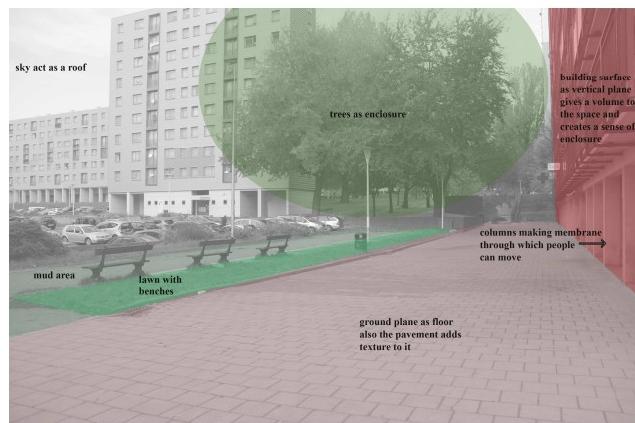
Francis D.K. Ching in one of his book was defining architectural space through some elements. According to Ching, architecture has its elements by which it produces space and also through this elements the building forms, boundary of a space are created. (Ching, 1987). Ching founds, the architectural elements are column which makes a point in a space and if we put two columns it makes a membrane through which we can pass, wall which is a plane and which separates here and there, floor that act as a field of space with territorial boundaries and roof that provides shelter for the volume of space underneath. (Ching, 1987). In architecture all these elements are used to create space. From the physical setting of the plaza of Peterbos (*figure 5*) described above it can be said that it has architectural elements that gives it a sense of space as per Ching's definition of space in Architecture.



**Figure 3: Defining Space (Ching, 1996, P-91)**



**Figure 4: Elements of Architecture that Defines a Space (Ching, 1996, P-91)**



**Figure 5: Image Showing the Elements of Architecture in the Plaza that defines it as a Space**

Again referring to Ching, he said that through a volume we move, we see forms, here sound, feel the warmth of the sun, smell the fragrance. The plaza of the Peterbos is something where one can move, feel the breeze and sun, see the forms in nature. According to Ching a space inherits the sensual and aesthetic features of those elements in its arena. (Ching, 1987). The plaza of Peterbos inherits the sensual and aesthetic characteristics of architectural space.

Space is also about light. “A space can never reach its place in architecture without natural light” (Kahn, 2003). Daylight in a space generates dynamics of movement, shadow, change of color and intensity. From the field observation in Peterbos it has been seen that from the morning to afternoon the light changes rapidly and this is how the shadow changes, color and texture changes and it creates a spatial environment and gives a quality to the plaza which makes it a space. The effects of light and shadow can also be seen from figure number 2. The series of tree canopy on the south side provides shades to the ground. The interplay of light and shadow in the plaza makes it a space.

Architectural space can also be sensed by sound and therefore for space is also about making of sound. Any space can be understood by or felt by sound, as sound accompanies an image. Sound can help us to visualize an image of a space through which we can sense. Plaza of Peterbos also has its own sound formed by the movement of people and natural breeze which adds an essence to the space. From the observation it has been found that this plaza is used for a lot of activity such as people pass by, children play, friends call each other from one building to another, people go to the shop, all these activities generate sound which act as an element, creating an image to perceive a space.

So, a space in architecture is perceived through some elements, enclosure, surface, texture, light and sound. From the above discussion Plaza of the Peterbos can be said to be a space.

On the other hand in humanistic geography space is an abstract concept without having any meaning. '**Space**' can be termed as a location which does not have any social connections for human being. According to Tuan (1977), "It does not invite or encourage people to fill the space by being creative. No meaning has been described to it. It is more or less abstract" (Tuan, 1977, p. 6). From this point of view as Peterbos is a location with physical characteristic, it can be said to be a space.

On contrary '**Place**' is more than just a location and can be termed as a location produced by experiences of human. For this location size does not matter and it could be limitless. It can be a classroom, a plaza, a city, neighborhood, a region etc. In reality 'place' occurs of 'space' that is filled with meanings and purposes by human experiences in this specific space. Tuan finds "Places are centers where people can satisfy their biological needs such as food, water etc. (Tuan, 1977, p. 4)." The Plaza in Peterbos becomes a center for the people in everyday life. This has a shop and pharmacy where people go for their need. According to Tuan (1977) a 'place' does not exist of perceptible boundaries. Place is besides a perceptible manifestation of a precise time period. Plaza at Peterbos has got meaning through its use by the inhabitants and people. From the observation it has been seen that a lot of activity happens in this plaza all day long. Observation was done in weekend from morning 9.30 a.m. to afternoon 4.30 p.m. Observation through videography summarized and listed in a table below and also shown in *Figure 6*:

**Table 1: Showing Activity of the People**

A Lady was Passing By	A Man Was Returning After Doing Grocery and Other People were going Out	Some Students were Surveying the Site and Talking to People
An Old Man Sitting in the Bench and Talking to Other Person.	A Boy Going Out With Bike, Some Elderly People are Chatting in Group.	Two Kids are Playing.
A Lady with her Kid Having a Troll.	An Old Lady was Having Troll with her Dog.	An Old Man Going to the Shop.
Mini Truck Came From the West Side and Two People were Unloading the Stuffs	Two Muslim Ladies were Taking Their Kids to the Park.	A Muslim Lady Was Going to Shop Outside with her three Kids.
Three Man was Walking and Talking to Each Other.	A Young Group of People were Hanging Out	Some Teenager Boy was Having Food



**Figure 6: Collage of Activities of People Documented Through Time-Lapse (How People Appropriate the Place)**

This plaza holds a lot of activities which gives a meaning to this plaza and when a space gets a meaning with activity and gets attracted by people it becomes a place. A place is eminent with its qualities and can be differentiated from a space.

According to an Italian geographer Franco Farinelli (as cited in Agnew, 2011) said, in ancient Greeks two meanings of a place can be clearly found.

*"Place is a part of the terrestrial surface that is not equivalent to any other, that cannot be exchanged with any other without everything changing. Instead with space [place as location] each part can be substituted for another without anything being altered, precisely how when two things that have the same weight are moved from one side of a scale to another without compromising the balance. In the second case place is assimilated to space (it is location) whereas in the first place is distinguished from space as having its own special qualities."*

Here in one meaning he says a place is something which has its own character and quality which separates it from a space and the other one meant a place is integrated to space (saying it location).

To understand Peterbos from this theoretical point of view I would like to illustrate the interviews as cases. Two respondents were interviewed on weekend and weekdays to understand their perception about this plaza.

**Case 01:** The first respondent is a young Muslim boy named Hakim, age of 25 lives in building number 16 in Peterbos. He is originally from Morocco. His family has been living here for 40 years. He works in a cinema and goes to work by his own car. For him the most used space in Peterbos is the Plaza. He uses this plaza every day. This plaza is a meeting place for him. He has friends who live in the building which is close to the plaza. He meets his friend every day in this plaza at afternoon and night in weekdays and in weekend they meet in the morning also. He goes to the shop in the ground floor beside the plaza. When he was asked to go back to Morocco he was not ready for that, for him this place is significant. He has grown up here playing with his friends, he can call them up from the plaza and they come here. It is related to his everyday activity. This space is related to his memories. When he was asked to name a place that reminds him about Peterbos he named this plaza.

**Case 02:** The second respondent is a Muslim woman named Farida, age of 46 lives in building number 13 in Peterbos. She has been living here for 20 years with her family. She has five kids. She is a housewife. She is originally from Morocco. She goes out every day to do the grocery at the shop in building number 9. Her friends also shop in the same shop, so they get a chance to meet here. Her kids play here with their friends. For her this place is secure and she

feels happy being here. She said she has a lot of friend here and they have a very strong bonding. Whenever she was asked to go back to Morocco she said she does not want to go back. For her Peterbos is everything.

From the interview in the plaza it has been found that this plaza has an emotional attachment with the user which is a place attachment. This attachment is not replaceable. The value is not equivalent to any other place. No one can exchange this with any other place. This plaza is a center of attraction to young people who lives here. It is an interaction place for elderly people. They come here, sit in the bench to get sun, talk with the neighbor. They get to see the children playing in the plaza and at some point they can see the park. They come to the shop inside the building number 9 for their daily grocery. Children play in the plaza. The young people who grew here claimed this plaza as their place. They use it at daytime as well as night time. So, the physical character, location, functions, activities, social behavior and attachment with the plaza makes it a place.

In this regard I would like to quote "*So space and place are dialectically structured in human environmental experience, since our understanding of space is related to the places we inhabit, which in turn derive meaning from their spatial context*" (Seamon & Sowers, 2008, p.44).

## CONCLUSIONS

Spaces are the materials through which a place is created in architecture. When the space achieves some quality that strongly reinforces the mind of the people, the space becomes a place. The qualities of the space not only depend on the design of architectural elements but also on the activities and social behavior of that space. From the observation and interview it can be said that the plaza even though was designed as a space but it has got meaning through activities of user and people are very much attached to this plaza which gives a notion that there is a sense of belongings, a sense of place.

## RECOMMENDATION

Now a day's our architectural practice is becoming more aesthetical and form oriented rather than concentrating on the importance on the space as place making. Though the concept of space is not universal but it has a great impact on human psychology development starting from child age to a grown up person. Multidisciplinary approach can be an effective tool to produce an effective design.

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